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Putting the Victim on Trial

A California shooting yields a tale of sex and intrigue

When Edward Cooperman, a professor of physics at California State University, Fullerton was found dead in his office last October, shot in the neck by a .25-cal. pistol that lay in his hand, police at first suspected suicide. Several hours later, they arrested the man who reported the crime, Minh Van Lam, 21, a Vietnamese immigrant and former student of Cooperman's. Lam later admitted shooting the gray-haired professor, but insisted it was an accident that happened while the two of them were "playing around" with the pistol at Cooperman's suggestion.

As Lam's murder trial begins next week, however, the focus will be not on the suspect but on his victim. Whatever the immediate cause of the killing, Cooperman's case has already exposed a tale of sex and international intrigue. Defense Attorney Alan May argues that Cooperman, 48, was a secret agent for Viet Nam. Indeed, Hanoi has accused the CIA of masterminding the death. Cooperman's friends and relatives ridicule such allegations, but they too think the shooting was political: the professor's well-known sympathy for the Communist regime in Hanoi made him highly unpopular among Vietnamese immigrants in Fullerton, a conservative community near Los Angeles.

Cooperman, like many college professors and students at the time, was an outspoken opponent of the Viet Nam War. But his interest in the country, which bordered on obsession, outlived America's controversial involvement. In 1977, two years after the fall of Saigon, Cooperman made the first of about a dozen trips to Viet Nam. Upon his return, he founded the nonprofit Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam, through which he publicly lobbied for normal diplomatic and trade relations with the new pro-Soviet regime.

In a modest way he began to procure technological equipment for export to Viet Nam, despite the formal U.S. embargo on all but relief aid to that country. From January 1981 until November 1983, the Commerce Department issued Cooperman and his committee seven licenses to export goods to Viet Nam; all the exports were officially described as "humanitarian aid." According to records recovered from Cooperman's office, however, his purchases included such items as closed-circuit video-surveillance equipment and Apple computers. Sending Hanoi these sophisticated products would almost certainly be illegal. "The law says you cannot even export a bicycle," notes Steve Johnson, Viet Nam desk officer at the State Department.

Lam and another student maintain that Cooperman, who was married and the father of two teen-age daughters, gave studded leather jackets to several of his male Vietnamese students and liked to wrestle with them on his office floor. In his office police found homosexual magazines and photos of Cooperman with provocatively dressed young Asian men. Lam says he once asked Cooperman why he did not simply stop working on behalf of Viet Nam. "I can't," Cooperman reportedly replied. "It's too late and I'm in too deep."

Anthony Russo, a co-defendant with Daniel Ellsberg in the Pentagon-papers case and a friend of Cooperman's, defends the physicist as "a humanitarian" and claims he was "assassinated" by "right-wing military Vietnamese death squads" in Southern California. Cooperman's widow bitterly resents the allegations of espionage and homosexuality. "I'm being asked continually to defend my husband," she says. "I'm not the victim any more. I'm the accused."

—By Susan Tifft. Reported by Dan Goodgame/Los Angeles



Lam: an accident while "playing around"?



Cooperman: an obsession with Viet Nam